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The family is fundamental to the child's development and parental cooperation in the education of children is important. How to involve parents in child development centers, beneficial types of parent participation, precautions to be taken to assure the safety and protection of the children, and supplementary parent programs are discussed. The teacher should visit the homes soon after the children are accepted for the center, and should invite mothers to accompany their children to school. Involvement of parents from poverty areas in preschool programs may require such special efforts as direct personal contact by clergymen or neighborhood merchants. Professional staff members may use influential parents or community leaders to explain the program to parents. Some ways in which cooperation can be obtained are individual conferences, parent meetings, and special committees. Centers should give parents some formal voice in establishing and operating policies and programs, and in decision-making. All parents may participate in the program as part or full-time employees or as volunteers; efforts should be made to utilize and capitalize on the skills, talents, and unusual experiences of parents. Additional planned instruction may be desirable to supplement programs in which parents participate; examples are work-study periods, guest lectures, films, reports, and discussions on assigned readings.

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Project HEAD START

parents Are Needed

Suggestions On Parent Participation in Child Development Centers

Office of Economic Opportunity, Washington, D.C.

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
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THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

The Child Development Center is both a concept and a community facility. In concept it represents the drawing together of all those resources—family, community and professional—which can contribute to the child's total development. It draws heavily on the professional skills of persons in nutrition, health, education, psychology, social work, and recreation. It recognizes both paid and volunteer non-professionals can make important contributions. Finally the concept emphasizes the family is fundamental to the child's development. Parents should play an important role in developing policies; will work in the Centers and participate in the programs.

As a community facility the Child Development Center is organized around its classroom and outdoor play areas. Ideally it should also provide a program for health services, parent interviews and counseling, feeding of the children, and meetings of parents and other residents of the community. The space is arranged so as to permit working in small groups or individually with the children. Where some activities are performed at other locations, the staff should function as an integral part of the Center.

INTRODUCTION

The human baby, unlike the offspring of most animals, is born helpless and requires a long period of dependency. His growth, development and learning are slow processes requiring many years in which care, protection and guidance are essential. Without the continuous help and support of others during this long interval on the road to maturity, he could not develop into a self-sufficient, able adult.

In America, this essential protection and care for the young child comes most commonly from his parents. By the time the child reaches school age in the United States, his teachers assume that his parents have provided for his well-being and fostered his learning experiences. A family is expected to have helped its children learn to master the language, care for themselves, get along with others, and absorb the values, religion and customs of their own group.

It has long been recognized that there should be a great deal of interaction between parents and those who care for their children away from home. Working together, they can reinforce each other's efforts to help the child develop. Without cooperation neither can be fully effective.

INVOLVING PARENTS IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN GENERAL

Almost all those who work with children recognize the importance of the cooperation of parents in the education of their children. The Parent-Teacher Association came into being to meet the need. Child Guidance Clinics recognize the role of parents in the therapy of children; many require the child's parents to participate with the child in the therapeutic process.

Yet with the increasing complexity of modern life and the increasing distance of today's schools from the homes of the children, fewer and less satisfying contacts with parents are possible. Many schools have discontinued home visitations and parent conferences because of scheduling difficulties. Many parents still feel that the school is only interested in the family when the child has done something wrong; they hesitate to take the initiative to contact teacher or school.

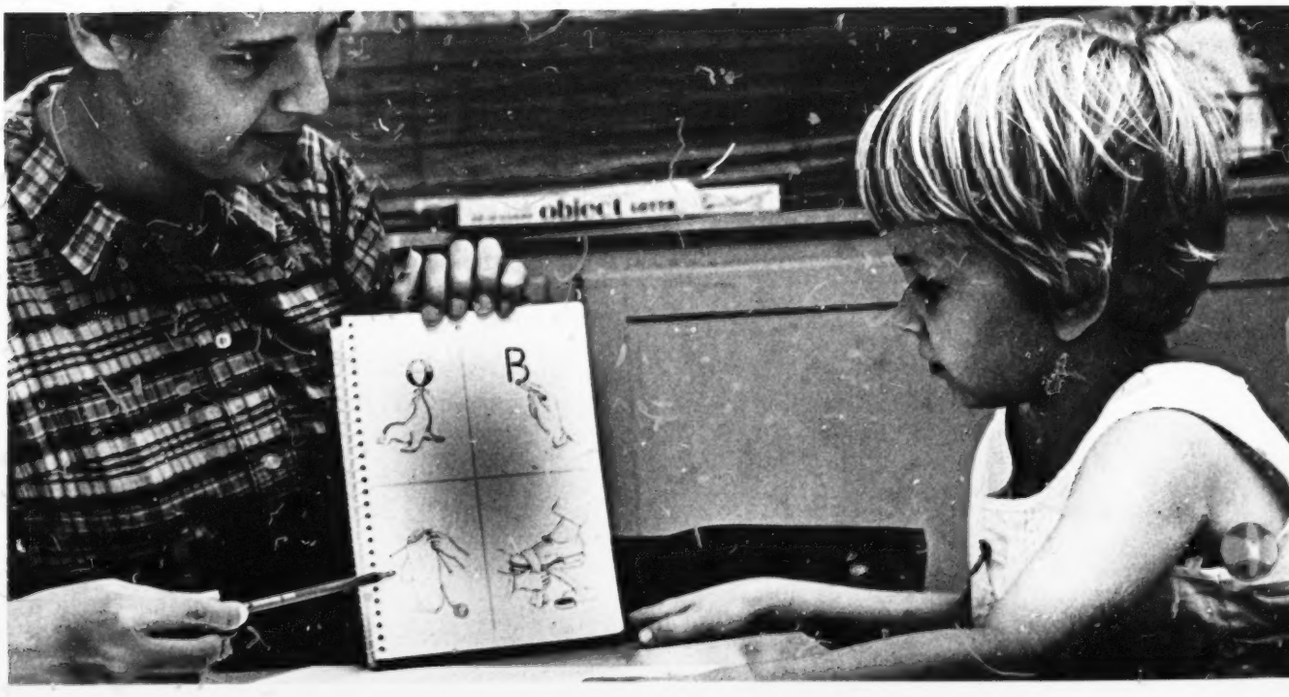
It is at the nursery school level that this trend may be most easily reversed.

Those who have never worked with parents of young children may be pleasantly surprised to discover how close such parents are to their children, and how willing they are to talk freely about them to the child's first teacher. Home visits by the teacher soon after the child is accepted for the Center, or invitations to the mother to come with her child, are methods that may be effectively used to attract parents.

CONTACTING PARENTS FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER PROGRAMS

Involvement of parents from poverty areas in pre-school programs may require special efforts. A notice in the paper, handbills, or an invitation from school or church to enroll children in the Center will not always be enough. Direct personal contact may be necessary to bring favorable response from parents whose previous attempts to secure the better things of life have encountered scorn or rebuff.

Clergymen and merchants respected in the area may often be the best initial contact.



Scheduled home visits, interviews or conferences are the formally designated ways of obtaining information useful to the teacher in determining the best program for each child. But much valuable information can be learned from listening when parents bring or pick up their children, and during the many informal opportunities afforded when parents participate in study groups, social events or scheduled parent meetings.

While many of the decision-making problems described here may seem trivial, they are nonetheless important to the child and his parents. In one closely knit community at least one of the parents always came home at noon and had lunch with the children. A survey revealed that since parents went to work

GOLD MEDAL
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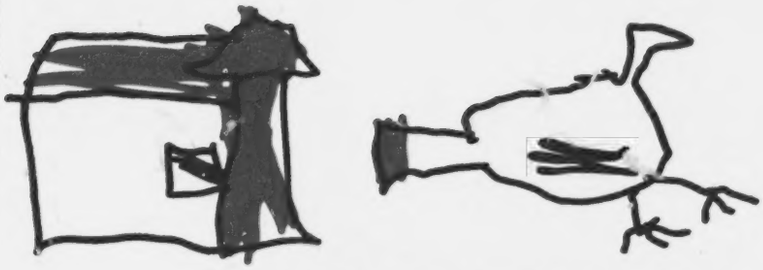


early or worked a night shift, only a few children ever breakfasted with their parents. Older children got breakfast by themselves, or younger children went without it.

From this information, the decision was clear. The main meal of the Center became breakfast since the noon lunches had been disturbing a valuable family custom.

Willingness to allow parents a voice in decision-making requires an acceptance of certain basic assumptions. It must be assumed that there exists an inherent quality in all persons commonly referred to as responsibility and integrity.

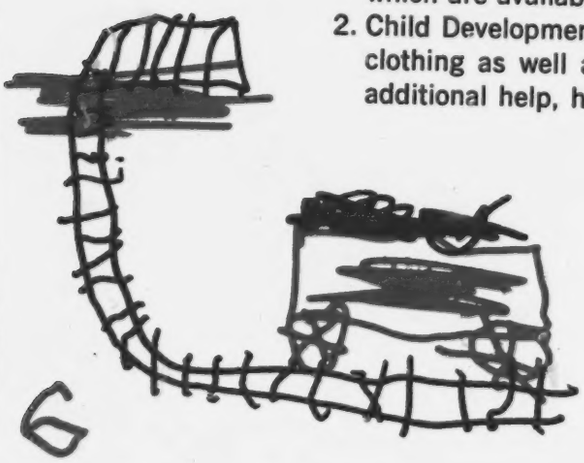
There is the further assumption that all people will respond with integrity and responsibility when made to feel wanted, needed and accepted. Those responsible for children will find it profitable to receive parents' complaints, advice and suggestions with sympathy and understanding. Final decisions will be made in the light of the best possible evidence and experience in relation to the over-all goals of the program.

They know the parents and those whose influence can be used in reaching others. Center staff members may also contact officers of mothers' clubs in the neighborhood schools and settlement houses, leaders of neighborhood women's organizations, church organizations, or any other groups formed of members of the immediate community and held in regard by that community.

The professional staff members of the Center may wisely use these parents and community leaders to do the first knocking on doors to explain the program. Such leaders may also be willing to outline the program at community meetings, or to introduce teachers to parents through home visits.

When approaching parents, the informant might find some or all of the points listed below helpful in explaining the program.

1. Head Start will provide opportunities for the children which are available in no other way.
2. Child Development Centers care about health, food and clothing as well as education. If a child needs special additional help, he will get it.



3. The Head Start program is designed to fit the needs of each child—not to fit him to the needs of the Center.
4. Parents will have a voice in running the Center. Opportunities are available to them to work on a paid or volunteer basis in the Center.
5. Attendance at a Center is not a mark of shame because of the parents' poverty, nor an indication of their inadequacy. Rather it is an indicator of the parents' real concern that the child have the best that is available to him.
6. Federal Officials will not permit discrimination in the Centers. Each child and his parents will be treated fairly.
7. The Center has programs for parents as well as children.

Discussion of these points at the outset will help parents understand three important things: (1) that the program is designed to provide what is best for each child's growth and development; (2) it is helping them to prepare for school; and (3) that no one is more vital to the success of the program than the child's parents.

Professional staff members contacting parents from low-income areas for the first time must be prepared to encounter suspicion, hostility, resentment or indifference. An invitation to enter children in the Center may in some way elicit lack of interest or a flat refusal. The only people who visit the home may be school attendance officers, police, or others whose missions are not happy ones. In the face of such visitors, they are quite apt to shut the door.

Staff members, therefore, must be prepared to expend large amounts of patience and understanding in their contacts with parents, and be willing to allow themselves to be tested by the parents over a long period of time before they win confidence and respect. Once a good relationship has been established, such parents can become willing and valuable participants in a program they are convinced will be helpful to their children.

These parents will need continuing encouragement over the entire period of their children's involvement at the Center. Staff members should place a high priority on developing regular ways of letting these parents know they are needed and that their efforts are appreciated.

Staff members should also make a home visit after each child has been accepted to learn more about the child, his home, and how they can help both. This will also enable the child to meet his teacher before he goes to school.

The teacher should not be carrying a great many frightening documents. She may, however, find occasion to say something like: "Oh, I'm glad to know that. I want to write it down so I won't forget." She can then take out a pencil and paper and make a few notes. She should record necessary information as soon as possible after the visit.

PARENT PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM

One of the most valuable ways of enhancing the effect of the Child Development Center is to involve the parents actively in the program. Such involvement promotes a closer, more continuous relationship between young children and their parents. Studies indicate that the length of time parents and children spend together is not as important as the quality of their relationship during whatever time they are together.

Parents may find it easier to accept their own child as he is when they learn the meaning of his behavior in relation to his needs. When this happens, parents and teachers can plan more constructively together for the good of the individual child as well as for that of all the children attending the Center.

Similarly professionals can gain considerable insight and understanding from association with parents. The latter often have valuable ideas about interests, reactions and attitudes which are essential to working successfully with the child. It is clearly not possible to draw a distinct line between the responsibilities of the professional and the parent. It is quite clear, however, that a maximum of cooperation and interaction between teacher and parent is likely to produce the greatest benefit for the child.

There are many ways in which cooperation can be obtained; individual conferences, parent meetings and special committees are all useful devices. Centers will generally benefit by giving parents some formal voice in establishing and operating policy and program. Parent rights which are essential in every Center include the opportunity for them to have their questions answered, have their recommendations and complaints carefully and sympathetically considered and *above all* have a chance for appealing arbitrary actions against them or their children. Obviously, parent rights and parent responsibilities go hand in hand. It should be understood by all that the staff must have considerable freedom and flexibility to carry out a program which seems professionally sound. Perhaps the key to successful cooperation between parents and students is the willingness on the part of each group to accept the sincere interests, good intentions and competence of the other. They must accord to the other the same respectful hearing and consideration that they would like to receive.

The child's first teacher becomes a second mother to the child. Long after the child has been in school, he will often call his teacher "Mommy." She shares with the parents the pleasures and responsibilities of helping him take this important step toward maturity.

Parents, even the most unskilled, can participate in the program in an unlimited number of ways: as part or full-time employees; or as volunteers.

Depending on their ability and personality; they can do custodial work, drive buses or other forms of transportation, serve as teacher aides or work with other parents. They can maintain and repair buildings, equipment and grounds. They may assist with the lunch and snack programs, serve as baby sitters, or care for older and younger children while other parents participate. If they are skilled, they may operate projectors or other devices. If professionally qualified, serve in such positions as teachers or nurses. The decision to use parents as employees or volunteers in the program means that the professional staff must assume responsibility for providing necessary training to the parents. If training is continuous it may be possible substantially to upgrade the skills of the parents. This has two advantages. It may create further employment opportunities for the parents; secondly it may provide more manpower to staff full year child development centers at times when adequate numbers of professionals are not available.

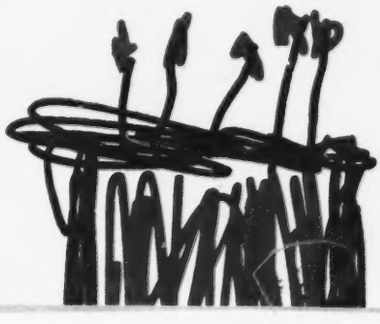
The volunteer efforts of parents can be very useful to the program and give self respect and dignity to the individuals themselves.

For men, building repairs, painting, cleaning and transporting heavy materials may be suitable volunteer tasks. Young fathers, often under the direction of a father employed in the building trades, enjoy an occasional evening together working on these activities, and an experience that results in pride at helping their own children.

Many mothers will be willing to spend evenings in making and mending drapes, curtains and other decorative features, cleaning, and otherwise helping meet group needs. Under skillful leadership, the participation of parents with their own children can be an enriching personal experience which may carry over into the home.

Community spirit may be enhanced by a picnic or box lunch, or by out-door recreation following a work session. An interested committee of parents may plan and supervise both the work and the social activities.

Such well-planned and continuous efforts involving parents may often serve to moderate or stop completely the kind of conflicts and misunderstandings which may arise when the parent knows and understands little about the Center, and feels and behaves defensively because of his lack of information.



USE OF SPECIAL SKILLS, TALENTS AND EXPERIENCES

There are few situations in the life of a child more exciting and wonderful than those when the child can say with pride to his friends, "That's my Daddy," or "That's my Mommy."

Every effort should be made to capitalize on the skills, talents and unusual experiences of parents by sharing them with the children of the group, and, in some cases, with parents at a group meeting. A few examples may suggest other possibilities.

A father who played in a dance combo played his horn for the children. The children not only enjoyed the music, they learned where the music came from and why. They tried out the effects of pressing different keys, they "felt" the music by touching the horn while it was being played, and some even tried making music of their own for the first time in their lives. Interest was high, and questions numerous and intelligent. The session ended with a free expression period which permitted the children to act out, sing, or dance in any way the music suggested. This half hour was one of the happiest for the group and a very rewarding experience for the father.

A first generation Spanish-speaking mother whose English was halting but understandable, came with her daughter to let the other children see her beautiful dresses and to hear and learn some words in Spanish that all children like to hear. Among others, they learned how to say "please," "thank you," "I love you, darling," "kiss me, Mommy," "Good Morning," "I liked that," and "I'm so happy" in Spanish. More importantly, the children and other adults present achieved new insights into the positive values of a culture other than their own, as well as learning that people are more alike than they had thought.

The skills used need not be those which require years of expensive training. Imagine the delight of the children when Jim's father, a mountaineer who had become an expert whittler, brought his razor-sharp knife and a bundle of green branches to the Center and expertly created various simple objects the children had requested: a boy, a girl, a whistle, a hog-caller, a chimney sweep, a boat and a wall decoration.

The father was shy and said little, but he was unhurried and kind to the children. He was the most important man in the world to the children that morning, and especially to Jim.

A northern rural family invited the children to enjoy the spring weather by visiting their sugarbush, where maple syrup was being made. The home-made spigots, the steaming open-fired cauldron, and the one-horse drawn drag on which the children were permitted to ride as they collected the fresh sap in the shiny buckets opened up for many children a new vision of nature.

Every community has unique and interesting people and resources unknown to many children, and often to adults, though they are readily available. To the young child, new and different experiences awaken new insights and new hopes. The community becomes a better place in which to live. To professional workers, the parents and the community can become a rich source of curriculum materials, making their task easier and more rewarding. To the advantaged children in the group, such experiences create new respect for others less fortunate or different from themselves.

PARENT PARTICIPATION: SOME CAUTIONS

Using parents to help with children's activities places an extra burden on those in charge. Staff members must be aware of the problems and dangers involved in order to take the necessary precautions.

The safety and protection of the children must be assured at all times. Parents must be oriented to their responsibilities, and cautioned against action that might endanger the children. For example, they must be sure to understand that the children for whom they are responsible must never be left alone or out-of-sight at any time. Only responsible individuals should care for the children while their parents participate in Center activities. Such substitute parents should always be provided with a means of contacting those in charge in case of emergency.

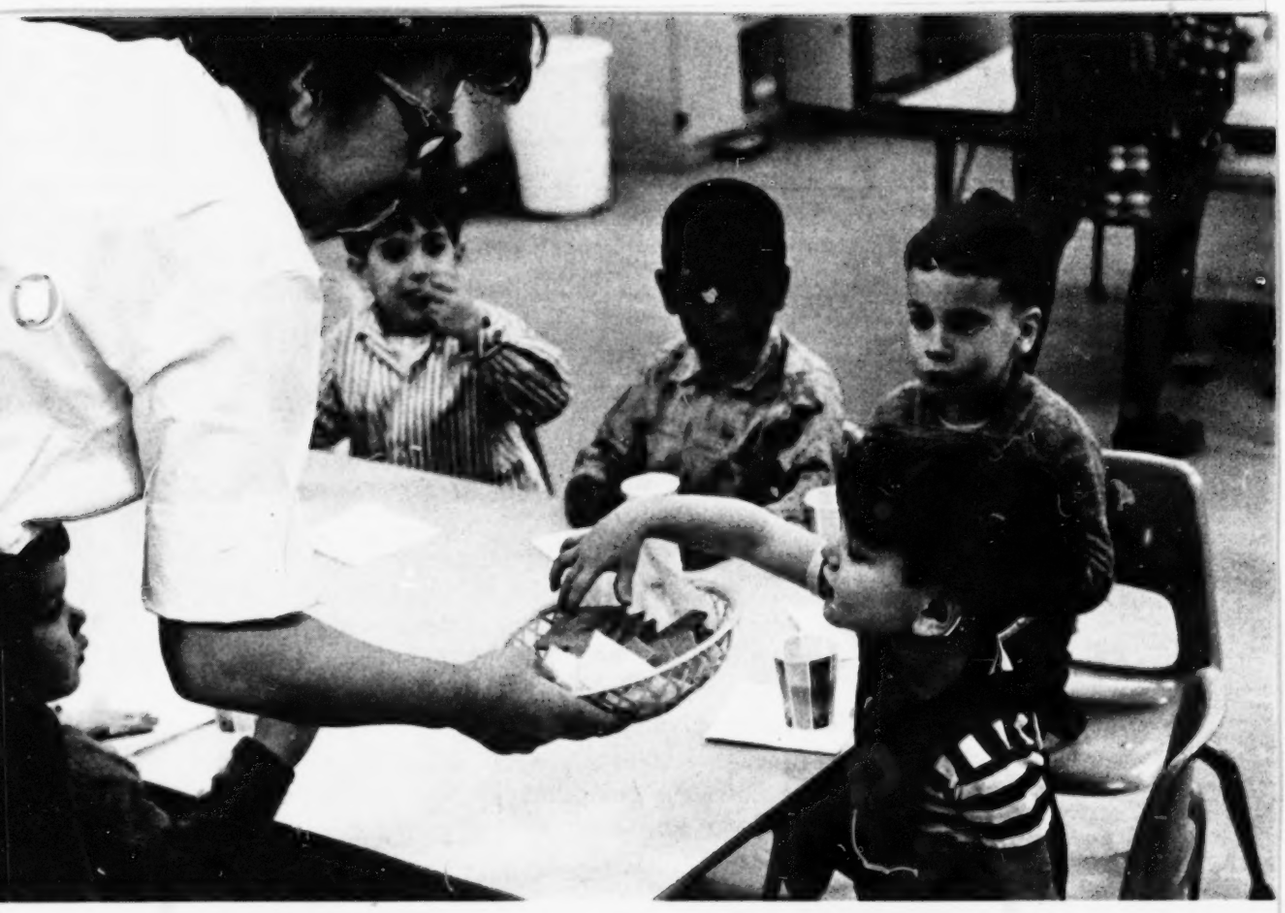
A person who is known to be an habitual drinker must not be allowed to provide transportation on a field trip. Unreliable people cannot be counted on when schedules demand their presence at specified times. No person should be used if they have been known to molest or harm children in any way. Ideally, all adults working with young children should provide an example of integrity and good character. All parents, as well as professionals and other adults, should be instructed they cannot be with the children when they have a cold or feel ill. Because their services are relied upon, volunteers and staff members should realize the importance of informing the Center as early as possible of their expected absence.

Directors of programs must familiarize themselves with local health and safety requirements before delegating authority. Insurance needs, must not be overlooked, particularly automobile insurance. Many personal policies are void if an accident occurs when private cars are used to transport children on trips or to school. Before parents are permitted to transport children at any time, they should secure a statement from their insurance agent, certifying that their policies will protect them and the children while using their cars for such purposes.

It is also well to determine the extent of liability involved and protection afforded by insurance on buildings and equipment, by workmen's compensation, and by personal liability or other insurance policies in force. Children should never be allowed to go on trips away from the school without signed permission slips from their parents. Permission statements can be so worded that one signature can cover all trips during a specified period of time and for designated purposes.

Those parents selected to read stories to small groups or to help children in their activities should be those whose language is correct and whose diction is clear.

Leaders aware of potential problems in parent involvement can take the necessary precautions to prevent most, if not all, of the undesirable aspects of this important part of pre-school education programming.



SUPPLEMENTARY PARENT PROGRAMS

The direct participation of parents can be most valuable. Nevertheless, additional planned instruction may be desirable to supplement and make more meaningful the programs in which they participate.

Regularly scheduled meetings or work-study periods may be initiated. Guest lectures, use of the many excellent films available, reports and discussions on assigned readings may all be used to orient parents to their participation and the kind of contribution they can make.

In some cases home study courses for parents are available through colleges and universities. Some local school systems offer short courses, conferences, and long term programs as part of their adult education programs. Family life conferences sponsored by churches or community agencies may comprise part of the parent-education program of the Centers.

Often the parents who appear to need parent-education the most do not attend the programs planned for them. They may give as reasons lack of suitable clothing or a feeling of discomfort in the presence of outsiders. These objections are valid, and sponsors of programs should do everything possible to meet and overcome them.

One school social worker in a disadvantaged area organized a parent group specifically for people who had never attended more than one PTA meeting. Officers were elected by the new

"Parents' Council" and instruction given in how to plan and conduct meetings. Somehow, the mother elected president found ways of dressing better, as did the other officers and most of those attending.

Many of the meetings were work meetings, and soon outsiders were welcomed to lead discussions and help solve pressing problems of the families involved. Two years later, the original president of the group was elected president of the same local PTA she had never attended.

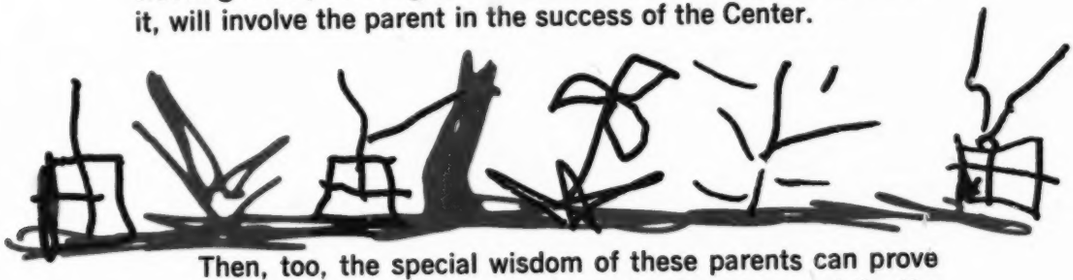
Such successful programs re-emphasize the fact that disadvantaged parents have the same basic needs for expression, attention and recognition as the more fortunate parents, who have been offered greater opportunities. Self-confidence and self respect are powerful motivating forces, and every opportunity should be taken to help disadvantaged parents feel accepted, wanted and worthwhile. Parent education, including courses that develop personal skills and competencies, can prove invaluable in improving the home and family life of young children from disadvantaged areas.

PARENT PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

It is not easy for those in a responsible position to relinquish power when decisions must be made; they realize they will be held responsible for the results of such decisions. The very fact that Center directors and professional personnel occupy positions of responsibility usually attests to their training, experience and competence in the decision-making process.

However, there are many reasons why involvement of parents in the decision-making process at Child Development Centers may be desirable.

Most people will not commit themselves strongly to any program that they are not involved in. The very process of considering facts, arriving at a decision and helping to implement it, will involve the parent in the success of the Center.



Then, too, the special wisdom of these parents can prove invaluable in many decisions that involve, directly or subtly, the traditions, practices and values of the immediate community. Only residents know intimately the conditions under which they are living, the problems they face, and the priorities that should be established in meeting them.

Once a decision has been made to involve the parents, however, Center personnel may still have to withstand the temptation to continue the old decision-making processes in more subtle ways.

Even when parents attend a decision-making meeting, professionals may be tempted to do most of the talking. They must, ask parents for their ideas, and then listen with attention, patience and understanding.

If the parents' suggestions are feasible and practical, they should be put into effect. If they are not usable, the parents should be informed as promptly and tactfully as possible just why these immediate ideas are inapplicable at the present time.

Whether or not any of the parents' suggestions are finally adopted is not as important as the fact that the parents' presence is desired, and that their comments are invited and listened to with respect.

That the people who staff the Center have confidence in the potential of parents of the neighborhood should be evident in every relationship between staff and parents.

WHEN PARENT DECISION-MAKING CAN BE HELPFUL

Parents can be valuable in helping to make certain kinds of decisions. Administrative personnel need parent counsel, for example, in determining schedules. Parents' working hours, transportation problems, community traditions, religious beliefs and community mores, must all be taken into account in determining days of the week and hours of operation of the Center.

Care must be taken not to schedule events on nights or days traditionally set aside for special community events. Many religious groups observe special holidays; the traditional days of worship may vary. Center planning must accommodate such variety.

In some cases transportation problems can be eased by establishing times convenient for parents bringing or picking up their children on their way to or from work. To ignore the wishes of parents in scheduling may result in hardships for parents or in preventing attendance of children.

Perhaps the most important parental decision-making can center around what is best for their individual children. All parents are fully aware of their own children's food likes and dislikes, their physical ailments or recurring illnesses, their good and annoying habits, their fears, and the kinds of words or activities which may disturb their children.